"Neither Tibetan nor Chinese": National Sentiments of Young Tibetan Elites Educated in China

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journal or publication title	駿河台大学論叢
number	53
page range	59-78
year	2016-12
URL	http://doi.org/10.15004/00001615

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1. Introduction

Tibetan identity inside Chinese territory, despite (or because of) its elusive nature, has been one of the most fervently disputed topics within the exile community, its supporters and by the Chinese government. Although journalists and academics in different fields have also expressed their views on the issue, these tend to be highly polarised, as has often been pointed out[1] – either representing a pro-China depiction of Tibetans as one of patriotic China's minorities who enjoy cultural expression and economic prosperity under a benevolent communist governance, or the pro-exile representations of Tibetans as a people whose cultural and religious identity has been thoroughly obliterated, and who passively endure Chinese repression and persecution. Whilst it is true that this ideological gap is fuelled by a lack of access to contemporary Tibet (ethnically Tibetan regions in China, particularly, TAR [Tibet Autonomous Region]) and its people, the argumentation on both sides, with the exception of a few (e.g. Barnett 2005), seems inevitably prone to oversimplification, thus failing to reflect the complex nature of Tibetan lives inside China. From a reversed perspective, it could be said that disregarding the conflicting or deviant character of contemporary Tibetan identity may be necessary if one is to sustain an unambiguous stance.

In this article, I want to address the conflicting nature of Tibetan identity, by focusing on the elite Tibetan youth educated in China, their cultural experiences and national identities. The Tibetan youth I am presenting here are called *Xizangban* students, who are annually selected by examination from a variety of regions within the TAR and sent to interior China *(Ch: Neidi)* for their secondary education. This educational system is considered a significant part of the Chinese civilisation project for its minorities (e.g. Harrell 1995), but often criticised by outsiders as sheer 'assimilation' (e.g. Wang and Zhou 2003, Lafitte 2003).

These young Tibetans are constantly confronted with their ethnic peculiarity and inferiority under the gaze of Han Chinese in interior China. Once they return to Tibet, they are again regarded as 'odd', this time by their fellow Tibetans. For a significant part of their youth, they are exposed to a set of conflicting and polarised values, such as Chinese/Tibetan, civilised/backward, modern/traditional

[1] For example, see Powers (2004). Also see Okawa's analysis (2011) on various academic discourses on the Tibetan incidents of spring 2008. Investigating apparently 'less political' stances that connect the Tibet Issue to the economic problem, he argues that they also tend to be trapped in a hidden political agenda, explicitly or by not aligning themselves with the arguments of either pro-China proponents or pro-exiles. This tendency, he argues, demonstrates the operation of the 'law of excluded middle', which excludes vital elements constituting the Tibet Issue, dismissing thereby contradictions and internal discrepancies.

and scientific/superstitious, which prevail in a wide variety of socio-political contexts. As will be discussed, these Tibetan youth attempt to cultivate their ethnic ambiguities through embracing, rejecting and extracting what the above polarities *mean* to them.

This article has two aims. Firstly it aims to examine this controversial educational system and its political implications, the natures of which have hitherto rarely been analysed. Secondly it aims to attempt to proffer, despite its intrinsic conceptual difficulty, an alternative perspective on 'Tibetan identity' inside Chinese territory, through ethnographic descriptions of the *Xizangban* students. In order to comprehend the topic from a different angle, a modern Tibetan fantasy of Japan, as developed *and* 'Buddhist,' will also be briefly discussed.

2. An Overview of the *Xizangban* (Tibet Class) Programme

In 1984, when Tibet remained economically devastated in the wake of the disastrous Cultural Revolution, the central government proclaimed its establishment of an educational programme under the slogan *Zhili Yuanzang* (Aid Tibet by Intelligence). The severe lack of skilled and reliable cadres of Tibetan ethnicity at that time was considered as an immense obstacle to stabilise Tibet's economic and political situation. [2] This was the main backdrop against which the *Xizangban* (Tibet Class) programme, the main imperative of which is to educate selected and able Tibetan children in the interior China, was initiated. Accordingly, *Xizangban* were set up inside some prestigious Chinese secondary schools, and *Xizangxiao* (Tibet School), where Tibetans are exclusively enrolled, were established in the Han majority of developed metropolises, such as Beijing and Shanghai[3]. For nearly three decades, about thirty-five thousand[4] Tibetan children have been sent to acquire "sophisticated" and "civilised" educations in those secondary or higher institutions. More than twenty thousand graduates are said to have already returned to Tibet to work in various governmental units or within Tibet's promising industries, such as tourism.

The children who participate in the *Xizangban* programme are in principle graduates of elementary schools in TAR, and most are of Tibetan ethnicity[5]. The selection examination involves

[2] It is very likely that the then Beijing's decision to decrease the large number of Han Chinese officials in the TAR government is a significant environment for establishing the *Xizangban* programme.

[3] At the moment (2014), there are fifty-three educational institutions of *Xizangban* (Tibet Class) or *Xizangxiao* (Tibet School) set up in eighteen provinces or cities throughout China. In official documents, the designation *Xizangban(xiao)* is normally utilised to signify both, but this article follows the colloquial custom of calling it simply *Xizangban*.

[4] This number is confirmed in a speech by the vice-chairman of the TAR, Meng Deli, during the conference for training the principals of *Xizangban* schools on the 18th June 2010 (*Xizang Ribao* 2010 June 19). However, the number of 'about thirty-five thousand' might not reflect the reality in a strict sense, since it can reasonably be suspected (as locally rumoured) that affluent Tibetan families, although these are limited in number, send their children to the *Xizangban* programme without necessarily following official procedures, accessing the programme through personal connections, bribery, and so on.

[5] The children of Han Chinese and other nationalities are also entitled to participate in the *Xizangban* programme. Its statistical number is not publicly announced, but for example, among three hundred and fifty-seven selected children in Lhasa in 2010, forty-nine of them were Han Chinese (*Lasa Wanbao* 2010 July 15). Considering that the programme was originally only for Tibetans, it is notable that quite a high proportion of Han Chinese from Lhasa are accepted onto it, although this is less likely in less urban areas outside Lhasa, due to the relative small population of Han Chinese there.

academic subjects such as mathematics, Chinese and Tibetan languages, but also health checks and assessments of "moral attitude" *(sixiang pinde)*. About two thousand pupils are selected each year, and more than seventy percent of them are said to be from nomadic or agricultural backgrounds (Guo 2008: 100). Given the statistical fact that around eighty percent of the whole population in TAR reside in rural areas,[6] it can be said that the selection is relatively fair. The tuition fees and all the living costs of *Xizangban* students are largely subsidised by the TAR, central and host provincial government, but due to the recent economic development of Tibet, part of students' expenses are now required to be paid by their respective families.

As early as in the late 1980s, understandably, such distant schooling was hardly considered valuable by many Tibetan parents, who would have been gravely concerned with the mental as well as the social welfare of their children if they were to study far away at such a sensitive age. However, the programme has gradually become popular, even beginning to be widely accepted, especially in Lhasa since quite a few parents there wish their children to have a high quality education in order to afford them a promising future in terms of their careers and marriages. Particularly, since around the early 2000s, Lhasa parents have become so keen to get their children admitted into the *Xizangban*,[7] that pupils appear to be under tremendous pressure – both from their parents and schools who compete with each other for the coveted places in the programme.[8]

The Tibetan children who enter the programme are taken thousands of miles away from their homes. In their first year they are trained to remedy academic deficiencies in terms of the programme, particularly to improve their spoken and written Chinese. For the following three years, except for a few Tibetan language classes, they take almost the same academic subjects as other Han Chinese children do, and they are taught through Chinese textbooks, in Chinese language and by Chinese teachers. For these four continuous years the children are not permitted to return to Tibet even during holidays. Upon their graduation, some are promoted to Han Chinese dominated senior secondary schools, whilst many students enrol in vocational schools or *Xizangxiao* (Tibet School) to study for another three years. Again, except for the short period before the enrolment, these Tibetan children are not allowed to return to their homes during their schooling days, during which time the only opportunities they have to interact with their ethnic fellows are those with classmates living in the same dormitories. For these seven years, particularly for the first four years of *Xizangban*, the top priorities of education are patriotism (or Han-Tibetan friendship), revolutionary tradition, and other state-oriented national moralities (Zhu 2007). It is unsurprising, therefore, that the Tibetan children

6 See, for example, *Tibet Statistical Yearbook 2014*.

7 Lhasa people's tremendous concern with the *Xizangban* is reflected in a local newspaper. After the official announcement on the result of the selection examination, *Lasa Wanbao* (Lhasa Evening News) puts the names of all the selected pupils, their ethnicities, the names of their parents, and even the government unit or company they belong to.

8 In 2007, the abolition of the *Xizangban* programme was widely rumoured in Lhasa and beyond. An obvious background for this is that the educational level in Lhasa has been rapidly improving since the last two decades, and it can be fairly presumed that the authorities had begun to recognise this transformation. However, a main incentive for the abolition, as I was informed by a relevant official, is apparently presented by the educational authorities in the TAR, who have expressed concern over the excessive degree of pressure that the prospect of admittance to the *Xizangban* programme causes parents and schools to place on young children.

on the *Xizangban* programme naturally start to affiliate themselves with Chinese language, customs and worldview, since they are dissociated from Tibetan language and culture, particularly Buddhist customs. This impact on young Tibetan elites is immense and, as elaborated later, it constitutes the main obstacle for them when attempting to re-enter the Tibetan cultural soil.

Some competent students, after completing their *Xizangban* programme, may enter universities in China to specialise further[9]. Noticeably, however, the majority of the Tibetan children, after their seven or eleven years of 'China experiences', return to Tibet. Their economic as well as social statuses are generally promising due to their excellent command of Chinese language, acquired expertise and cultural level *(wenhua chengdu)*; most of them in fact occupy lucrative positions, such as those of government officials, entrepreneurs, engineers, teachers and interpreters (or tour guides), thus constituting a prominent section of the so-called '(upper) middle class' that has recently emerged in Lhasa.

Steven Harrell, in his inspiring discussion of Chinese civilising projects concerning their ethnic minorities, encourages us to look at the Gramscian notion of hegemony, through which he intends to shed light on the complicity of ethnic people (Harrell 1995). He proposes the term, 'compradore elites' (*compradore* means 'buyer' in Portuguese, originally referring to a Chinese agent working for a foreign company) for the peripheral or colonised peoples who play active roles in Chinese modernising or colonising projects (ibid: 34). It seems that the political position of Harrell's 'compradore elites' are the one that our *Xizangban* elites, forged out of the national imperatives of the Chinese state, are expected to occupy as reliable ethnic agents for civilising Tibet and its people.

3. Various Perspectives on *Xizangban*

Views regarding the *Xizangban* programme and its participants are, unsurprisingly, presented by a variety of political factions. It is worth introducing the discrepancies among them briefly here, since it helps to highlight the problems inherent in *Xizangban,* and those within us as observers of it.

Critical or negative opinions of the *Xizangban* programme are, generally speaking, held by researchers based in Western institutions. For example, US based Chinese educationalists Wang and Zhou (2003) argue that the dislocated schooling of *Xizangban* purposefully discourages the nurturing of Tibetan identity and pride, due to the non-existence of culturally responsive pedagogy. Tibet Information Network (TIN) reports that the objective of *Xizangban* is to Sinicise Tibetan children to such an extent that they become "essentially ignorant about their own culture and bereft of any feelings for their own nationality and nationality interests" (TIN 1999: 11). Lafitte, a Tibet policy analyst, sees the *Xizangban* education system as sheer "assimilation", further implying that, for many Tibetans, Chinese modernity is "attainable at too great a cost to personal integrity" (2003: 13), the implication of which is that Lafitte views a *Xizangban* education and the maintenance of Tibetan identity as radically

9 There is a tendency for Tibetan students from the TAR to choose science, business and other 'useful' subjects to study at university, whereas it is largely Amdo Tibetans outside the TAR (in parts of the neighbouring provinces of Sichuan, Qinghai and Gansu) who study Tibetan culture and language as their specialities.

incompatible. To my bewilderment and surprise, in the initial stage of my research into the *Xizangban* programme, a Tibetophile of my acquaintance who works for Amnesty International, perhaps out of sincere concern, was discouraging because she was adamant that Tibetans engaged in *Xizangban* were "China's spies", and warned me I should not consider working with them.

As these negative views on the *Xizangban* explicitly highlight, one would expect a certain degree of 'Sinicisation' among the students, and I would raise no objections to the notion that those Tibetan children are enormously associated with Chinese language and customs and, to a significant degree, alienated from Tibetan ones. However, is it not perhaps simplistic to hold that 'Tibetan identity' is thoroughly depreciated during their *Xizangban* schooling in China, as the above outsiders argue? Does 'Sinicisation' inevitably involve the dissipation of 'Tibetan identity'? Among the exile community and their sympathisers, it is generally believed that Tibetan Buddhist traditions in China were forcefully eliminated, or fabricated in the interests of the state. This stance generally involves an enduring assumption that Tibetans inside the Chinese territory are passive, oppressed victims, deprived of 'Tibetan-ness'. This perspective, it seems, constitutes a prime undercurrent to the above researchers' negative views on *Xizangban* and its participants, who are, without doubt, radically exposed to Chinese modernity and its prosperity.

The views of domestic researchers will now be introduced, which might be interesting in providing direct contrast to the views of outsiders given above. Guo (2008) demonstrates and analyses the results of a questionnaire investigating the experiences of ex-*Xizangban* participants in *Tibetan Studies (Xizang Yanjiu)*, the academic journal published by a governmental body, the Tibet Academy of Social Science. His informants are one hundred and sixty in total, comprised of people from various occupations, such as government officials, teachers and doctors. Guo's main conclusion is that "they [*Xizangban* students], who fully enjoy the Party's education policy on minorities, … became the main force for the maintenance of Tibet's political stability, and also for the national unity. … Because of their frequent interactions with Han Chinese, and also of broad travelling there, they came to understand the history and culture of their motherland comparatively deeply, … universally embodying fervent passion of patriotism" (ibid.: 110). This kind of optimistic and positive comment is typical not only of those found in local journals and newspapers, but also in virtually all the governmental publications dealing with *Xizangban* (e.g. Suo 2011).

Interestingly, a Chinese academic equipped with social research methodology conducted a thorough investigation into the construction of the *Xizangban* students' ethnic identities. Through his ethnographic approach on the *Xizangban* pupils in Changzhou, Jiangsu Province, Zhu (Beijing Normal University) attempts to analyse the ways in which Tibetan identity is constructed within the school and Han dominated community (Zhu 2007). Whilst he explicitly points out some problems within the programme, such as the lack of curriculum for Tibetan culture and the ethnic contradiction between the pupils and teachers, his main (and perhaps only) argument throughout the book is plainly that Tibetan identity is substantially maintained in the school context, due to the dynamics between ideologies "assigned" by the state and cultural expressions "asserted" by the students. It seems that Zhu avoids engaging in critical discussion of the political nature of *Xizangban*, and the students' ethnic dilemma in

a broader cultural context, thus merely reporting on the positive development of ethnic Tibetan identity, selectively highlighting some ideological aspects, for example, the students' "Critical Attitude toward Tibet and Tibetan People" and "Admiration of Han Chinese People" (ibid.: 280-1). The book seems to me to be a typical governmental 'report', aiming as it does to endorse the educational value of *Xizangban*, which the state wants to disseminate. It could presumably be said that the scant attention Zhu accords the conflicting or contradicting nature of the students' identities may be in no small part due to the fact that he excludes complicated experiences that many ex-*Xizangban* students have after they return to Tibet, from the scope of his research.

In contrast to the above two distinct views on *Xizangban*, we find one approach that is neither positive nor negative, and is indeed radical and intriguing, despite the fact that it does not emerge from thorough research on the issue. Tsering Shakya (University of British Columbia), during his interview in response to the 2008 demonstrations in Tibet, remarks that "… Tibetan students tend to come out of them [*Xizangban* schools] much more nationalistic – on blogs and websites they are often the ones leading complaints against the Chinese government, for depriving them of their cultural identity and their language" (2008: 14). Shakya's Chinese 'interlocutor', Wang Lixiong,[10] concurs: "… many of the young Tibetans sent to China to be educated become the most radical oppositionists, with the strongest [Tibetan] national sentiments" (2002: 109).

Both Shakya and Wang may use slightly hyperbolic language, but it is indeed true that the aspiration for what one has been irreversibly deprived of tends to become powerful and enduring. In his short essay on identity, the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman contends that identity is "born as a problem" (1996: 18). By this, he means that identity does not *become* a problem, but *is* a problem from inception, since it is "something one needs do something about — as a task" (ibid.). Identity may never exist as a visible, unproblematic entity, but may be embodied, articulated only in a dis-embedded or unencumbered form. Viewed in this light, what Shakya and Wang argue becomes clearer: the *Xizangban* programme, which uproots the Tibetans from their cultural soils, paradoxically but precisely because of this deprivation, operates to strengthen the participants' consciousness of their ethnic identities.

It can be said that most outsiders' discourses on *Xizangban* participants tend to fall in the two bipolar stances described above. They are stuck in dichotomous discussions as to whether 'Tibetan identity' is weakened or maintained, or at best how it is so. The ambiguous and paradoxical nature of identity that Shakya and Wang acutely imply seems to be decisively out of the range of the outsiders' cognitive understandings. Whilst these diametrical stances may be profoundly linked to the ideological niches of respective researchers and commentators, there seems to be another reason for the divergence, that is, the peculiarity of political position which *Xizangban* (ex-)participants occupy. For the Chinese authorities, these Tibetans *must be* reliable and faithful people who ardently share national interests with the Han Chinese. However, they are simultaneously ethnic 'Others', who could be considered a radically different people from the Han in terms of culture and religion, and possibly

[10] Wang Lixiong is the husband of the eminent and famous contemporary Tibetan writer Woeser. For interesting discussions exchanged between Tsering Shakya and Wang Lixiong, see *The Struggle for Tibet* (2009).

political sentiments also. In the eyes of the observers who view the *Xizangban* programme in a negative manner, the *Xizangban* students and graduates appear as China's 'collaborators', and are therefore 'Tibetan traitors' who fundamentally support the Chinese state and its imperatives, despite their 'pure' Tibetan ethnicity. From both dichotomous stances, those peculiar Tibetans look *intimate and opponent at once*, appearing as radical 'strangers' (cf. Simmel 1950[1908]), whose physical proximity and similarity belies vast cultural distances. Considerations of this kind seem to be significant in forming a backdrop against which outsiders, motivated by their respective political fantasies about *what Tibetan identity should be like,* tend to select and repress aspects of 'Otherness' embedded in these *Xizangban* students.

4. Living within an Ethnic Dilemma: *Xizangban* Students in China and Tibet

It is clear that the experiences and identities of *Xizangban* participants, their qualities and significances evidently vary according to their respective characters, family backgrounds, academic performances, and contingencies encountered in China. However, in my ethnographic interactions with the *Xizangban*-experienced Tibetans[11] who resided in China during the 1990s, there were conspicuous characteristics and tendencies observed among them – some are unambiguously echoed in one of the perspectives we saw in the last section, but others are radically different or comprised of some of those discussed. I will now present various comments and social vocabularies[12] expressed by those young Tibetan elites with whom I socialised in Lhasa.

* * *

In their descriptions of their 'China experience' as a whole, the ex-*Xizangban* students are generally, fairly positive. In particular, they narrate their memories with respective Chinese teachers as nice and fruitful – "some of them were like our parents, taking care of us like their own children." It may not be so unnatural that the teachers would become parent-figures for the children who are separated from their homes and birth parents at such a young age. It seems that many of these Tibetans have nurtured grateful and intimate feelings towards kind teachers whose attention and care have become unforgettable. Also, it is worth noting that they never omit to point out the "civilised" *(wenming de)* manners which their Chinese teachers employed. For example, one female student said to me:

> In a school in Tibet, when students violated the rules, the punishment was very severe. I

[11] Detailed identity of the informants and many intriguing but sensitive comments are excluded in this article for ethical considerations. Main part of the research methodology is consisted of a combination of unstructured and semi-structured interviews. Most of them were conducted from early to mid 2000s during my stay in Lhasa. These interviews were conducted in Tibetan, Chinese, and Japanese and translated into English by the author for the purposes of this article.

[12] This section employs the mode of 'ethnographic present', firstly for the sake of simplicity, but more importantly because the data presented is widely observable at the time of writing the draft of this article (2013), and will be likely to be so for some years to come.

> remember my strict teacher, Puchung. He beat students when they forgot homework. Sometimes, he did not allow them to eat lunch. In the worst case, he made the students stand on ice with bare feet. In winter, he forced six boys to swim in a river, just because they did not do homework. Although I owe him a lot in my study of Tibetan language, I think his style of teaching was very old fashioned… In China, when the students forgot homework or violated the school regulations, teachers never beat them. They just asked the students to write a short essay reflecting on what they had done. They never ever beat us. This is one of the examples which show the sophisticated and civilised nature of Chinese education.

The *Xizangban*-experienced Tibetans, almost unanimously, seem to agree that education in China is better, civilised, well-facilitated, and superior to that in Tibet, since the teachers in Tibet, especially male ones, tend to resort to physical intimidation. The students found that this was "old fashioned" and showed a lack of "aptitude" *(suzhi)* on the part of the teachers. By contrast, in China, the students are not only given opportunities to learn various modern subjects, they are also taught by Chinese teachers who, they claim, are so "highly cultured" that they employ "reason" *(daoli)* rather than violence during the course of their instructions. The students' experiences of quality education in China, particularly their pride and confidence in having been cultured by these "civilised" teachers, unsurprisingly function to develop a sort of elite consciousness among those Tibetans, as will be described later.

Whilst there seems to be a general tendency for these Tibetans to have positive impressions of their Chinese teachers, their views of the Han Chinese students paint a radically different picture. In many cases, ethnic discrimination has emerged as a prime source of friction and animosity between Tibetan and Han students. "Backward" *(luohou)*, "filthy" *(zang)* and "savage" *(yeman)* are the most common tropes used by the Chinese in challenging the *Xizangban* Tibetans. Insulting questions are often asked, such as "Why aren't you black? Tibetan skin is normally black. You must be a fake Tibetan!" "There are only mountains in Tibet. The football never stays in one place, so you cannot play football in Tibet, can you?" It is often reported that Tibetan students, particularly male ones, tend to retaliate against such provocations, for example one man told me his story:

> When I was studying in Shanghai, some Chinese students despised me and often made fun of me. It was because of my ethnic origin. That was so annoying, so I stood up to them one time. When one started to ask me if we have rice in Tibet, I said, "Of course, we have," and he said, "Really? How big is it?" I replied, "About this size," I showed my fist. He looked surprised, and I asked, "Do you want to see and eat this rice?" He said, "Yes." So I gave his face my fist many many times.

Tibetan male students' clashes with the Han Chinese are apparently part of their school life[13]. Chinese

[13] I heard, from a government official at the TTB (Tibet Tourism Bureau) in Lhasa, that in the late 1990s they requested relevant *Xizangban* vocational schools to train more 'male' students due to the physical toughness of working as a guide in Tibet, but the request was rejected. In the end the schools allowed the majority of enrolments to be of 'female' students, since they wanted to avoid or diminish the prevalent violent episodes between Tibetan and Han Chinese students.

researchers also mention this problem, although without highlighting the issue (e.g. Zhu 2007, Guo 2008: 105).

It is true that Chinese perceptions of Tibetan people, in general, have been accommodating multivalent features since the late 1990s, particularly because seductive images of Tibet as "exotic" and "mythic" have been circulating, being commercialised in China's tourism discourses (e.g. Kolås 2004; Murakami 2008). However, it should be emphasised that although this exotic image is very powerful, it is merely one current among many, and most ordinary Han Chinese, including school children, seem to be at best indifferent to Tibetan Buddhism and its sacred images, or at worst comfortable with enduring derogatory images of Tibetans as "barbarian" *(manzi)*. Thus, not only school children, but also adults, the Tibetans say, tend to utter disparaging comments towards Tibetan people, such as "Tibetan backward society" or "insanitary, destitute Tibetans".

Chinese negative views of Tibet, understandably, strike at the hearts of Tibetan children who, missing their families at home, constantly crave to return there. Thus it may only be natural that Tibetan students in China develop, along with impulses to degrade their ethnic origin, a rebellious spirit against Chinese contempt of Tibet. This rebellious spirit, largely fuelled by their ethnic inferiority complex, sometimes leads to the outward practice of physical intimidation. However, it appears simultaneously to reinforce their motivation to study diligently in order to defeat their Chinese fellows. *Xizangban* students themselves say that they do comparatively well and often excel in academic performances.

The Tibetan students' experiences of having been uprooted in their childhood, and their immediate exposure to the Chinese gaze, are indeed crucial points in their young lives that make them acutely aware of their ethnic origins, strengthening their sense of being Tibetan. Also, their direct experiences of Chinese cultural values and customs, without doubt, help them to reflect on their Tibetan homelands in a more *detached, objective* manner, which, if they had continued to stay in Tibet, would have been difficult to acquire. As demonstrated by the above descriptions of the students' complicated interactions with Han Chinese teachers and students, they are encouraged both to dissociate themselves from and, simultaneously, to actively accept their ethnic identity. It is worth noting that this ethnic ambivalence naturally continues throughout their schooling in China.

* * *

After returning to Tibet, many of the *Xizangban* youth are confronted with difficulties readapting to the ethnic environments for which they have long been yearning. Guo, a Chinese researcher, despite his fervent inclination to the Party line, explicitly raises this issue, and, according to his questionnaire, more than sixty percent of his informants find it hard to readjust to a Tibetan 'cultural environment' (Guo 2008: 107-9). The following comments by ex-*Xizangban* students regarding this issue are helpful in comprehending the obstacles they face.

… Because I studied in China for seven years, if I compare myself with people who have lived

all their lives in Tibet, there is a difference in terms of way of thinking, clothes, food and so on. And… I am an ethnic Tibetan. Nevertheless, I do not know Tibetan history, and also I do not like Tibetan food very much. In particular, if I eat tsampa [traditional Tibetan staple, made from barley], I always have a stomachache. In China I began to like things that Tibetans normally don't eat for religious reasons, such as fish, pork and eggs. … I learned various things over the last seven years, but when I returned home after a long time, I heard my relatives and friends saying to me 'You are not like a Tibetan'. At that time, I was so sad, and started to become concerned with this matter. … even if I [tried to] think about myself, I could not find any ethnic Tibetan characteristics inside me except my speaking Tibetan. …

… [When I was a child] I was influenced by my parents, and became familiar with Buddhist customs, such as offerings to deities and not killing sentient beings. I used to like praying in front of Buddhist statues. … After I came back to Tibet … some disagreements emerged between my parents and me. For example, they said, 'It is important to make offerings for our future lives. Thanks to our past lives, we are now happy like this.' At other times, they told me, 'Everything you have now was determined by your karma.' I cannot fully follow this kind of old idea. I believe I can orient my fate by myself. Since I have experienced *Xizangban*, I am different…

I really feel ashamed, if I start to think whether I am like a true Tibetan or not, because, looking at myself, I find about sixty percent of me is occupied with Chinese customs, the rest, only forty percent is Tibetan. … The Tibetan language which I know is only colloquial. I have big difficulties reading and writing Tibetan letters. In the university, everybody was so surprised to learn that I do not know Tibetan. Yes, indeed, it is really a funny and strange thing, I think, if one cannot write and read one's own ethnic language…

Marx mentioned that, although there are so many different races in the world, they will be eventually united into one in the future. I believe this. In the contemporary era, the interests of youth are more or less becoming the same. … So even if one does not eat tsampa, or wear chuba, or if the appearance may look Chinese, as long as one has a wish and determination to contribute for the people of Tibet, I think one has a real Tibetanness. Mind and intention for Tibet is the only thing by which one can prove one's Tibetanness in this modern time.

What differentiates the Tibetan people with experience of China from the ones who stayed in Tibet all their lives, is their aptitude *(suzhi)*… you could say their cultural level is different from ours. Tibetans who were never educated in China… their thought *(sixiang)* has not been liberated *(jiefang)*, and their way of thinking is very narrow. Some local people still believe in superstitions. For example, when they get sick, they just pray to Avalokiteśvara [Deity of Compassion] instead of going to a hospital. …

> When I came back to Lhasa after finishing my four-years' study in Beijing, the Tibetans did look so lazy. They do not think seriously about their lives, society, and the future of Tibet. They are satisfied with their routine everyday lives. During the daytime they go to the teahouse to chat, and at night they go to the Nangma [Tibetan karaoke dancehall] to drink beer and fight. …

One can easily identify a variety of complex issues underlying these expressive comments. First of all, *Xizangban*-experienced Tibetans, with their confidence in having been 'cultured', tend to project derogative views onto local Tibetans. This occurs on a range of levels, from clothes and tastes to mentalities and aptitudes. They differentiate themselves from the locals, by employing the negative phrases, such as "superstitious," "indolent," "conservative," "emotional" and "passive." In a way, these Tibetan elites seem to appropriate some of the Chinese imaginings of Tibetans with which they were confronted in interior China *(Neidi)*. The cognitive boundary of civilised 'us' vis-à-vis backward 'them' is sustained by their strong sense of superiority. However, as easily discerned, it is equally intrinsically constituted by their sense of inferiority in having lost "Tibetanness." It is indisputably true that those Tibetan elites are unequipped with knowledge and experience of Tibetan culture and Buddhist traditions. Their appearance may look Tibetan, and they generally speak colloquial Tibetan, however, they not only lack the ability to write and read their native language, but have also, to greater or lesser degrees, become alienated from Tibetan traditional sentiments. In the eyes of local Tibetans, they may indeed look somewhat 'refined' or 'urban,' but they do not appear as 'true,' 'proper' Tibetans, and this is indeed a mortifying and regrettable experience for the young Tibetan elites whose consciousness of being ethnic Tibetan has become acute and powerful in China. Many locals of the same generation may simply be envious of these elite Tibetans, whose careers look promising due to their expertise and their brilliant command of the Chinese language. However, for the elites, although their sense of inferiority in not possessing "Tibetanness" may often be played down, this complex, for the most part, operates as a significant obstacle to them in re-entering the ethnic soils that they have been longing for.

The un-"Tibetanness" of the *Xizangban* participants is most symbolically demonstrated by their extensive use of Chinese loanwords. Although it is true that many Tibetans, particularly young people in contemporary Lhasa, cannot express themselves fully without relying on Chinese words and phrases[14], those Tibetan elites who were educated in China for an extensive period are, without doubt, the 'experts' in their spontaneous, creative usage of the two distinct languages. In Tibetan there is a specific word for (the way of) people who utter an unrecognised, hybrid dialect or language. They are referred to as *ra-ma-lug*, literally meaning "neither goat nor sheep." The connotation is that the sound of the speech is neither in one category nor another, and is thus rather meaningless, like the sound of a grotesque crossbred animal which is "neither goat nor sheep." The word, *ra-ma-lug*, is certainly a

[14] The names of new materials and commodities brought from China, such as food and electric devices, and terminologies relating to political, economic, and social issues are also commonly expressed in Chinese, even when corresponding Tibetan words do exist.

derogatory expression, often directed at the irregular, hybrid usage of Chinese and Tibetan. Incidentally, there is a Tibetan word, *rgya-ma-bod*[15], signifying a person of mixed Tibetan and Chinese parentage. It can literally be translated as "neither Tibetan nor Chinese." Historically, *rgya-ma-bod* children are limited to those of inter-ethnic marriages between Tibetan women and Chinese soldiers and cadres who arrived in Tibet during the 1950s. They were and are often considered bright and sophisticated, having white skin in contrast to the dark skin of pure, native Tibetans. It was formerly only these children who employed *ra-ma-lug* language. Recently, however, this improvised technique has begun to prevail and become popular, particularly among *Xizangban*-experienced young Tibetans, who can then be regarded as *rgya-ma-bod* in a socio-linguistic sense.

* * *

The elite Tibetans, who went through the 'China experience' offered to them through their participation in the *Xizangban* programme during their youth, are ethnically liminal and ambiguous, viewed as "neither Tibetan nor Chinese." They are caught in an ethnic dilemma – between their pride in being civilised in China and their sense of being deprived of "Tibetanness," or between their sentiments of derogation towards local Tibetans and their strong desire to return to their fellows' cultural environment. In their lives, particularly after returning home, they tend to be occupied with the ambivalent desire to *both* dissociate themselves from *and* associate with their ethnic home. They appear to swing ceaselessly between these two distinct and uncompromising values: Chinese/Tibetan, civilised/backward and modern/tradition. It seems to be, however, with this *in-between* quality (cf. Bhabha 1994a; 1996) of their ethnic existence, that they activate a remarkable sense of ideological balance in living their contemporary political reality. They may audaciously hold an internal world of 'Buddhist belief' (i.e. their devotion to the Dalai Lama) whilst disguising themselves in external adherence to China's national interests; they may carefully perform conformity with political repression and social change through their rational thinking, while sturdily maintaining a sense of Tibetan identity and religious devotion. As we saw in the previous section, it is this enduring national sentiment that Shakya and Wang acutely identified among the 'Sinicised' *Xizangban*-experienced Tibetans. Struggling with their ethnic contradiction, these Tibetans carve out a sort of third modality to let the above two conflicting polarities operate within their individual social spheres (e.g. Barnett 2005).

It may be worth presenting a few examples to illuminate the above point. Among the elite Tibetans, there are some who become tour guides due to their brilliant skills in foreign languages. As cultural brokers of their ethnic traditions, they are not only situated between locals and tourist gazes, but also between local interests and state power (Murakami 2006). In Harrell's (1995) terminology, as we saw, they are similar to 'compradore elites' who, as ethnic agents, engage in complicity with the state to exploit the locals. Whilst these Tibetans, as state-authorised guides, are responsible for

15 The corresponding Chinese word for *rgya-ma-bod* (neither Chinese nor Tibetan) is *banzang banhan* (half Tibetan, half Chinese), or the rather politically charged term, *tuanjie zu* (united ethnicity) can also be used as an equivalent.

representing Chinese national views and interests, they simultaneously immerse themselves in Tibetan Buddhist values in order to fulfil their mediating roles. A core element of their professional lives is that, within their positions as China's national agents, they simultaneously embody the values of Tibetan Buddhist culture, as representatives of Tibetans. Their careers are neither comprised of the national value of being solely Chinese or solely Tibetan, nor the simple reconciliation of both. They are accomplished in an ethnic *in-betweenness*, wherein these Tibetans negotiate between the two incompatible values of Chinese and Tibetan national sentiments[16].

As a different but analogous example, the story of Gonkar Gyatso[17], a modern Tibetan painter, helps us to understand the ethnic identity of *Xizangban* youth. He is not a *Xizangban* graduate, but, after the Cultural Revolution Gonkar was selected to be sent from Lhasa to Beijing to study art. After intensively training in modern art for a period of several years, he returned to Lhasa. Then, Gonkar, like our *Xizangban* students, 'felt like a Chinese looking at Tibet' on his arrival (Harris 1999: 179), sensing he was estranged from his natal cultural landscape. During his cultural rupture from the local environment, he began to rediscover traditional Buddhist painting *(thangga),* and, during the 1980s, he and his colleagues developed modernist skills and tastes through which they expressed their dislocated, lingering ethnic selves. In a sense, this was an attempt to "reinstate their Tibetanness (ibid. 185)" through employing the style of modernism. The result was 'modern thangka' that both uses and disuses traditional motifs. After his flight to Dharamsala, Gonkar's particular style became evident in his preference for allowing the iconometric grids (that were part of the traditional preparatory phase of *thangka* painting) to remain visible in his completed Buddhist images, whilst leaving the details of deities and demons obscure. Claire Harris, in her fascinating book on modern Tibetan paintings, points out that "[f]or him, line and measurement are of greater value in understanding fundamental artistic and philosophic principles" (ibid. 195)[18], and that his distinctive style certainly originates from his ambivalent position both as 'insider' and 'outsider' to his surrounding cultural spaces. His preference for "form over content" (ibid. 194), she argues, was a tentative answer to his struggle to find significant Tibetan character in the manner of modern painting.

If there is any striking parallel between Gonkar Gyatso and our elite *Xizangban* Tibetans, that is their experience of estrangement from their native soil on the one hand, and their wish to retrieve their lost ethnicity, on the other. At a metaphorical level, both of them indeed share the existential defects which reinforce their sense of being uprooted – that of lacking the 'content' of Tibetanness. However, they simultaneously tend to (or even are ordained to) accommodate the

16 The author is fully aware of the vagueness of this paragraph, which came out of ethical considerations. The aim of this paragraph is just to identify the conflicting political values within which tour guides locate themselves, rather than to explicate how both Chinese and Tibetan national sentiments are tactfully enacted by the guides on a daily basis.

17 He resides in London, and continues his career as a painter (http://gonkargyatso.com).

18 Claire Harris remarks that Gyatso's preference for 'form over content' in his modern thangka is something more than modernist taste, but that the iconometric grids of traditional thangka could be perceived to represent the codified memories of Tibetan culture. For this insightful point, she has recourse to an art historian, Erwin Panofsky, who, analysing medieval European and ancient Egyptian paintings, avers that "iconometric codes, rather than content or attached narratives, revealed far more about the aesthetics of a particular cultural group" (Harris 1999: 194-5)

inconsistent values found within respective social fields to reinstate their versions of ethnic Tibetan identity in the midst of Chinese modernity. Certainly, I do not intend to argue that all *Xizangban* graduates are equipped with these similar moralities and ideologies, regardless of their characters and social positions, but merely want to indicate that they are open to the significant possibilities wherein they could redefine conventional perspectives on Tibetan identity, through cultivating their peculiar cultural backgrounds and political positionalities.

5. Concluding Remarks – National Imaginings, Postcolonial Perspectives and *Xizangban*

In contemporary Lhasa there are a variety of national imaginings, fantasies and rumours in constant circulation.[19] Varying in their tones and contents, some are outspokenly nationalistic, but others tactfully involve implicit and oblique national metaphors, which usually appear fragmented or obscure to the eyes of outsiders.

For Japanese nationals who have experienced living there, it is not difficult to encounter the locals – particularly the educated ones – who express ambiguous but simultaneously explicit imaginings about Japan. The Japanese as "evil" and "foolish" is the view Japanese visitors or residents are generally familiar with. Indeed, this is a common picture disseminated in China's formal education and various patriotic films portraying Japan's colonial aggression against China. Naturally, Tibetans in Chinese territory are also informed and inculcated by such images, thus familiarising themselves with them to varying degrees. The other strand of imaginings about the Japanese is of a totally opposite nature: the Japanese as "courteous," "compassionate" and "excellent at technology". The grounds of this Tibetan imagining are worth noting: the belief that *Japanese share an affinity with Tibetans, both in terms of ethnicity and religion (Buddhism)*.[20] It is in fact far from true that the Japanese largely practise Buddhism, as Tibetans may (want to) imagine. Whilst Buddhism is certainly one important element amongst Japanese traditions, many contemporary Japanese are disenchanted with domestic Buddhism. Therefore, even if Tibetans are eager to attribute a "compassionate character" to the Japanese, on the basis of having Buddhism in common as national religion, this does not accord with reality. However, Tibetans' perceived ethnic affinity with the Japanese, partly reinforced by an inculcated image of a colonial evilness vis-à-vis China, seems to be enduring and powerful enough to support the fantasies above. Tibetan fantasies about Japan, when mentioned, are most typically enunciated with tropes like "(technologically) developed Buddhist nation" or, "civilised *kin* nation."

This Tibetan imagining is purely a myth. Although this Tibetan myth may be trivial in its

[19] Outsiders' imaginings of Tibet have been investigated for more than a few decades, but those of Tibetans about other nations (except China and India) have not been sufficiently explored and may be worthy subject of future research. Contemporary Tibetans tend to be treated as the 'objects' of Western or Chinese imaginings, but they can equally be approached as the 'subjects' of imaginings, expressing distinctive views and fantasies concerning other nations and nationalities.

[20] The Tibetan belief in ethnical affinities between the Japanese and themselves is not just a modern construction, but is reported to have existed in a certain section of Lhasa society since the early twentieth century, when Tibet desperately needed international alliances with other nations against China. See for example Hoshi (1977) and Bell (1924: 220) for historical Tibetan fascinations with Japan.

nature, and normally demonstrated in a contingent manner, it seems to provide a distinctive angle from which to view the inherent dilemma of modern Tibetan identity discussed in the previous section.

The myth implicitly echoes Japan's colonial past in China. A projected intimacy towards Japan may not be unrelated to present Tibetan predicaments under Chinese rule, a nation which Japan once exploited in a colonial manner. However, the most fascinating part of this myth for many contemporary Tibetans seems to lie in its indication of the possibility of the mutual *non*-exclusiveness between Buddhism and modernity. As seen in the previous section, modernity, science and superiority are always associated with the Chinese, whereas Buddhism, tradition and backwardness are associated with Tibetans. Such ideological dichotomy tends to naturalise a hierarchical ethnic relation, restricting the scope of national imaginings that Tibetans aspire to activate and enlarge. The myth indeed challenges the prevailing ideology, and it is in itself a form of social practice (cf. Appadurai 1990)[21] in the sense that it alludes to the future potentials of Tibetans by recourse to their imagined ethnic affinity. Thus it is not surprising that modern Tibetans like our *Xizangban* graduates, who have an acute sense of their dissipating traditional identity, seem to have difficulty remaining indifferent to what the myth implies. Often viewed as "neither Tibetan nor Chinese," these Tibetans are naturally eager to look to a more constructive aspect of their ethnic dilemma, that is, the value of *both* modernity *and* tradition, which the myth enshrines. To put it another way, the evocative power of the myth precisely lies in its shedding a positive light on the ideological rupture embedded in the identity of the 'civilised' Tibetans.

* * *

Perhaps at this juncture, it will not be too abrupt to introduce the argument of a postcolonial critic, Homi Bhabha, in order both to understand the nature of the myth and, more importantly, to provide a theoretical framework to explicate further the central theme of this article – the national identities of the *Xizangban* Tibetans. Bhabha expressively discusses the complicated identities of colonised people situated at the ideological intersection between the values of superior, modern and civilised on the one hand, and those of inferior, traditional and backward on the other. He argues that the relationship of postcolonial experience to a dominant culture is not simply antagonistic, but often generates empowerment[22] through one's active commitment to the 'undecidability' or 'indeterminism' between hierarchical, conflicting values. In his sympathetic forward to Franz Fanon's masterpiece, *Black Skin,*

[21] For comprehending the nature of the local practice of imagining, I accord with Arjun Appadurai (e.g. 1990; 1991; 1996), who contends that an imagination (or imagined representation) is neither a mere fantasy nor a simple escape, but can be a form of social practice by which an individual can engage in a negotiation between sites of agencies and possibilities inspiringly presented by Others. In his famous discussion on 'global cultural economy, ' he gives us the insight that "… [t]hese scripts [that are woven of the imagined lives of Others] can and do get disaggregated into complex sets of metaphors by which people live as they help to constitute narratives of the Other and proto-narratives of possible lives, fantasies which could become prolegomena to the desire for acquisition and movement" (Appadurai 1990: 9).

[22] See also Spivak's notions of 'enabling violence' or 'enabling violation' by which the colonised people are made socially visible, empowered to live in a colonial regime (e.g. Spivak 1990; 1996).

White Masks, Bhabha nevertheless criticises Fanon's representation of the "Manichean structure of colonial consciousness" (1994b: 120), that is, the psychological divide between the white colonialist self and the black colonised other, and furthermore, Fanon's 'naïve' desire to transcend dualities in a Hegelian, humanistic sense. Instead, Bhabha suggests standing in "the *non-dialectical* moment of Manicheaism" (ibid.) and then crossing, shifting the boundaries strategically. He claims:

> … a *half* acknowledgement of that Otherness which has left its traumatic mark. In that uncertainty lurks the white masked Black man; and from such ambivalent identification — black skin, white masks — it is possible, I believe, to redeem the pathos of cultural confusion into a strategy of political subversion (ibid. 120-121; *original emphasis*).

Bhabha encourages those victimised people, despite possible cultural estrangement from the mainstream, to fully embrace and cultivate their ambivalent positionalities; to dive into the contestatory subjectivities embedded within themselves. This act of ideological diving, according to him, would lead them to enter the "in-between" space composed *both* of 'the coloniser' *and* 'the colonised', wherein they could retrieve and activate a hitherto negated self; "[t]o be true to a self one must learn to be a little untrue, out-of-joint with the signification of cultural generalizability" (Bhabha 1994a: 137).

Surely, the postcolonial perspective that Bhabha illuminatingly presents helps us to comprehend the nature of the identities and cultural experiences of our *Xizangban* Tibetans. As shown, those Tibetans, civilised in the colonial centre, are ordained to accommodate dual incommensurable values and cultures through simultaneous identification with, *and* alienation from, Chinese modernity and Tibetan national sentiments. They are caught in an existential dilemma, as ambiguous ethnic beings divided by the values of the Chinese and those of the Tibetans. Simultaneously, however, they are politically inclined to the *both/and* option of postcolonial positionality that the myth above implies (we may well call it a *postcolonial myth*). In this light, the problems and potentials of the *Xizangban* educated Tibetans can be said to be very close to those of the postcolonial subjects that Bhabha and other scholars (cf. Williams and Chrisman 1994) articulate.

The above discussion raises the important and unavoidable issue of whether or not the contemporary situation in Tibet and its people can be justly termed 'postcolonial'. The Chinese government adamantly claims that Tibet was never ever 'colonised' but rather 'liberated' by communist reforms. According to this view, the theoretical framework of 'postcolonial' is untenable and unjust. In contrast, the Tibetan exile community would assert that present conditions in Tibet can *never* be interpreted as *post*colonial, since typically colonial policies, such as systematic immigration and restriction on religions, are being forcefully implemented in contemporary Tibet. That is to say, Tibet is presently being colonised by a vicious regime, and the people there are victims of Chinese occupation. Against this backdrop, however, I would argue that the dominance of these uncompromising nationalist ideologies is the precise reason why the postcolonial perspective would be helpful in examining the entangled national identities of Tibetans like our *Xizangban* elites.

One of the most significant virtues of this postcolonial framework is its attempt to shift emphasis away from the ideology of imperialist historicity and anti-colonialism, in which a bipolar form

of representation of the 'superior' and the 'inferior' is predominant, towards focus on the *actual lives* of the colonised subjects situated at the intersection between opposing values. Indeed, the postcolonial perspective in the context of Tibet, insofar as it never underestimates the enduring verticality of the colonial relationship between the Chinese and the Tibetans,[23] could be a constructive framework to dismantle conventional, simplistic views of Tibetans, through revealing the 'transverse zone' where distinctive cultural codes and values flow from one side to the other according to the practical needs and political wishes of the people positioned there.

James Clifford, an eminent cultural anthropologist, avers that the making and remaking of identities takes place in the "contact zones, along the policed and transgressive intercultural frontiers of nations, peoples and locales (1997: 7)." In the case of our *Xizangban* Tibetans, they are not only situated in these contact zones, but also, it seems to me, *lived as* the "contact zones", wherein different, contradicting social values intersect, thereby constantly requiring them to reformulate their modes of existence.

Acknowledgement

Without great amount of support given by numerous people, I could not have completed the draft of this article. Firstly, I would like to thank Dr. Dolores Martinez, for her constant encouragement throughout the many years of my PhD research. In addition, I owe gratitude to Professor John Peel, Dr. Stephen Hughes, Dr. William Kelly and Dr. Jakob Klein for their valuable suggestions. I also would want to thank Dr. Dawn Collins for her critical comments and laborious proofreading of the article.

I am also greatly indebted to the numerous people I met during my fieldwork in Lhasa. Particularly, I would like to express my special thanks to the ex-*Xizangban* Tibetans who interacted with me both in my social and private sphere, providing me with valuable insights and information. Detailed identities of them is omitted for ethical considerations.

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[23] As some critics point out (e.g. Mbembe 2001: 15; Williams and Chrisman 1993: 12), the term postcolonial is problematic because of its assumption that there is a temporal break; 'before' and 'after' colonisation. The apparent newness of the term helps to obscure underlying continuities between the past and present, and to mask perpetuation of the power relation. In reality, the age of 'postcolonialism' is a "combination of several temporalities" (Mbembe 2001: 15); the postcolonial time, to some extent, can be characterised in colonial terms, likewise, the colonial time can be analysed in postcolonial terms. This dissolution of temporalities is exemplified by the popularity of the 'Tibetan myth of Japan', in which Japan becomes both an imaginative symbol of 'anti-colonial' sentiments, and a symbol of 'postcolonial' morality, within which tradition (Buddhism) and modernity *can* coexist.

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